



Prelude to Greatness: an Early Work of Sismondi

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PRELUDE TO GREATNESS:
AN EARLY WORK OF SISMONDI

“En 1796”, stated Sismondi in a note written a few weeks before his death in 1842,

je commençai mes recherches sur les constitutions des peuples libres. Cet ouvrage, qui n'a jamais été terminé ni publié, mais sur lequel Benjamin Constant chercha à obtenir un jugement de l'Institut, m'occupa cinq ans. Les deux premiers livres contenaient l'exposition de mes principes sur la liberté et le gouvernement ; le troisième, l'analyse de la constitution britannique ; le quatrième, de celle de la république française ; le cinquième, de celle des anciennes constitutions d'Espagne ; le sixième, de celle des républiques italiennes. Les quatre suivants, de Suède, de Pologne, des villes Anséatiques et des Etats-Unis d'Amérique, étaient à peine ébauchés. Mes recherches sur les Constitutions des Républiques italiennes m'obligèrent à étudier leur histoire, et c'est de cette époque, l'an 1798, que datent mes efforts pour la posséder, et ensuite ma résolution de l'écrire.

This note was published by David Munier¹ in the following year; he added:

Dans cette première conception se trouvaient donc déposés tous les germes que la puissante intelligence de Sismondi devait féconder et mener à maturité plus tard. Dès cette époque, il se voua à la science sociale, dont il devait creuser et retourner profondément le champ, comme historien, comme économiste et comme écrivain politique. Il est à remarquer que ses travaux en économie politique sont d'une date aussi ancienne que ses recherches historiques.

In 1834 Sismondi published his article ‘Du Prince dans les Pays Libres ou Du Pouvoir Exécutif’², the first half of which had been written and printed in 1823 for the *Annales de Législation et d'Economie Politique*; it was, however, not published because of the suppression, under pressure on the part of the powers of the *Holy Alliance*, of that brilliant periodical. In a note added to the second part of the article, Sismondi stated:

J'ai développé pour la première fois, en 1799, les principes qu'on trouve ici, dans mes recherches sur les constitutions des peuples libres, qui ne

¹ David Munier, *Notice sur J.-C.-L. de Sismondi*. Extrait de l'*Album de la Suisse romande*, mai 1843, pp. 3-4.

² Extrait de la *Revue mensuelle d'Economie politique*, octobre 1834.

sont pas imprimées. Je les ai reproduits, ensuite, en 1807, dans l'histoire des Républiques italiennes et, en 1815, dans l'examen de la Constitution française (acte additionnel) et ailleurs³.

He stated, too, in this context:

Nous n'avons pas toutefois la sotte vanité de croire ne pouvoir rien apprendre en politique, dans un temps si fertile en enseignements, tandis que l'expérience a renversé tant de théories, ébranlé tant de principes et éclairé d'un jour si nouveau le caractère des hommes et celui des institutions. Au contraire, nous sentons le besoin d'aller sans cesse à l'école du temps et des faits, et nous avons appris à nous défier de nous-mêmes autant que des autres. Cependant, comme dans une longue vie nous avons eu déjà occasion de nous mettre à plusieurs reprises en opposition avec les opinions extrêmes qui dominaient tour à tour, nous trouvons quelque satisfaction, en comparant nos plaidoyers contre des systèmes opposés, à reconnaître que nous avons été consistant avec nous-mêmes, et nous croyons aussi que nos lecteurs prendront plus de confiance en nous lorsqu'on nous retrouveront le même après dix ans, vingt ans et trente ans d'études⁴.

In 1836 Sismondi published his mature considerations on politics. Once more he referred significantly to his earlier attempt at dealing with the same subject-matter:

Il y a quarante ans que j'ai entrepris un ouvrage sous le titre de celui que je publie aujourd'hui. Je le destinais alors à être très volumineux, à comprendre l'exposition et la critique de chacune des constitutions libres dont nous avons conservé les monuments. Lorsque les deux premiers volumes furent prêts pour l'impression, Benjamin Constant me proposa de les présenter à l'Institut. Le reçu du secrétaire, alors M. Champagne, porte la date du 27 prairial an IX.

Cependant, mes *Etudes sur les constitutions des peuples libres* ne furent jamais imprimées. Je sentis le besoin de faire des recherches historiques beaucoup plus étendues ; j'y ai consacré des longues années et l'expérience de près d'un demi-siècle, si fertile en événements, n'aura non plus, je l'espère, été perdue pour moi. Aussi l'ouvrage actuel n'a-t-il plus aucun rapport, pour le plan, pour la composition, avec celui de ma jeunesse. C'est presque avec surprise, cependant, qu'en feuilletant celui-ci, je trouve que mes principes ont à peine varié... Le livre que je présente aujourd'hui au public n'est presque autre chose que le développement et l'application de ces principes⁵.

It is strange that none of these telling references have been made use of by the editor of Sismondi's *Recherches sur les Constitutions des Peuples Libres*⁶, Professor Marco Minerbi. These authentic notes would have gone far to explain the fact, which puzzles the editor⁷,

³ Deuxième partie, p. (2).

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

⁵ *Etudes sur les Constitutions des Peuples libres*, Bruxelles 1836, pp. II-III.

⁶ J.-C. L. Sismondi, *Recherches sur les Constitutions des Peuples Libres*. Texte inédit. Edizione ed introduzione di Marco Minerbi. Genève, Librairie Droz, 1965.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

why Sismondi later on ceased to seek publication of this early work. More important still, they would have offered a significant contribution to the editor's task of tracing the biographical background as well as the place of the *Recherches* in Sismondi's *œuvre*. Indeed, Mr. Minerbi has made this task particularly difficult for himself (and his readers) by neglecting references to Sismondi's published work as well as to the comments of previous biographers and critics. Nor is it evident from his introduction, a major contribution of 65 closely printed pages, that he has taken these publications into account. This procedure has led him, as it was to be expected, into making faulty evaluations of individual facts as well as into advancing an inadequate and misleading image of Sismondi.

Mr. Minerbi's contribution consists of a biographical account of Sismondi's attempts at publishing his manuscript in France and in England, which were frustrated by the political vicissitudes of the time; of an enumeration of acknowledged and hypothetical sources of Sismondi's thought; and, interspersed with this account though not in the form of a systematic and substantiated commentary, an attempt at interpreting Sismondi's basic attitude as revealed in the *Recherches*.

In the biographical part there is some new and interesting information concerning Sismondi's departure from Tuscany in 1800; this information is based upon the editor's researches in the 'Museo Carlo Magnani' in Pescia. Sismondi left Pescia not only, as it has been generally assumed, because of the pull of his native Geneva, and, we may add, because it was impossible for him to have his writings published in Italy. He was compelled to leave because, on 6 October 1799, he was sentenced to perpetual exile from Tuscany, and all attempts at having the verdict quashed proved to be in vain for the time being. The refugee fate, which had bedevilled Sismondi's life ever since 1793, had once more caught up with him.

Mr. Minerbi is certainly right in describing as the political centre-piece of the *Recherches* Sismondi's debate with the French Revolution, which had heralded the breakdown of the old order, and his debate with ideas of Rousseau. However, he does not sufficiently emphasize the fact that Sismondi did not set out solely to deal with ideas in the abstract. Sismondi's methodological emphasis on observation and experience was not merely bookish; it was based upon his actual experience with people, his commercial and agricultural activities as well as his penetrating insight into the economic and social problems and ills of the countries in which he had lived. At the time of writing the *Recherches* he was engaged also on a pellucid, and masterly survey of the economic and social situation of Tuscany, which he diagnosed in detail and for which he devised a reform programme which compares favourably with the economic plans for developing countries today. A similar work of an even more comprehensive nature dealing with the Département of Geneva was written by him in 1801. It is only in the context of his seminal socio-economic ideas that the sweep and the profundity of his political thought can be grasped properly.

However, Mr. Minerbi expressly rejects dealing with the 'valutazione della situazione economica francese' which was advanced by Sismondi in his *Examen de la constitution française*. Just as he omits the attempt to place the *Recherches* in the context of Sismondi's *œuvre*, so he is unable to do justice to the economic basis of Sismondi's political thought. In the context of a writer such as Sismondi who, throughout his life, emphasized that politics and economics were basically inseparable parts of the 'science sociale', such an omission must invalidate a critical evaluation of his work.

In his treatment of the influences which reveal themselves in the *Recherches* Mr. Minerbi makes some suggestions which deserve attention; on the whole, however, his account is not free from errors of commission and omission. His most valuable contribution consists in his emphasis upon the impact which John Adams made upon the nascent thought of Sismondi. Unfortunately, he fails to make the most of this connexion. Adams provided the first contact for Sismondi with the emerging *New World* of the United States. This contact grew into one of Sismondi's life-long preoccupations, namely that with the type of society which developed under the virgin conditions of America. This preoccupation found itself reflected in his numerous publications on the subject; it gave colour to his political speculations and was to prepare the ground for Tocqueville's ideas. Both in the context of America and of democracy in general the affinity between Sismondi, Tocqueville, Wakefield, and Cherbuliez would have afforded a more adequate picture of the impress of Sismondi's ideas.

Mr. Minerbi rightly points to Delolme as one of the important influences in the formation of Sismondi's thought; in this case, however, the influence was even more important than he indicates. Many of the formulations of the *Recherches* echo the careful *précis* which Sismondi had made of Delolme's 'ouvrage fondamental' during his stay in England in 1793/4. It was indeed because of Delolme's silence in the face of the French Revolution and subsequent developments that Sismondi felt impelled and justified to advance his own political ideas.

Apart from Rousseau and Delolme, there are some other Genevese writers mentioned by Mr. Minerbi, namely Mallet du Pan and P.-H. Mallet. No adequate reason is given for the inclusion of the former among the early influences on Sismondi. As regards the latter, the editor's claim is grounded on Mallet's *Histoire des Suisses*, largely a rendering of Johannes von Müller's history which was published in 1803, that is too late to have possibly been taken into account by Sismondi when he wrote the *Recherches*. On the other hand, Mr. Minerbi fails to mention the writings by Mallet which were of immense importance to Sismondi. Sismondi himself paid tribute to his predecessor's relevant work in his brilliant study of Mallet:

Il s'éleva cependant au-dessus de ces écrits de circonstance, dans un petit ouvrage intitulé : *Des Intérêts et des Devoirs d'un Républicain par un Citoyen de Raguse* (1770). Il y conserva autant de modération qu'il y montra de force et de profondeur de pensée. Il rechercha quel gouverne-

ment convenoit à une petite République essentiellement commerçante. Il montra que l'aristocratie héréditaire ne pouvoit s'établir sans détruire les mœurs, le patriotisme, l'industrie, l'existence même d'un pareil Peuple. Il montra qu'une démocratie absolue y entraineroit tout aussi nécessairement la ruine de la justice, de la paix, de la liberté même, avec celle de l'Etat entier ; il montra enfin que ce n'étoit que dans un gouvernement où les deux principes se corrigeoient l'un l'autre, qu'un Peuple tel que le nôtre, ou tel qu'il peignoit celui de Raguse, pourroit trouver le bonheur⁸.

While Mallet is underestimated as an early influence, Johannes von Müller looms more largely than any other writer in the editor's introduction. Obviously he has made a special study of Müller. However, he gives no reason, as far as I see, for believing that Sismondi knew Müller's *œuvre* when he wrote the *Recherches*. There is no doubt as regards Müller's significance for Sismondi at the time of writing the *Italian Republics*. However, it is generally assumed that the two men did not meet until 1804, i.e. long after the writing of the *Recherches*. Müller was a Romantic whereas Sismondi, while taking historical development and national character into account, was a rational reformer. As H. Perrochon has rightly pointed out: "Ni l'un ni l'autre n'étaient démocrates, mais, républicain conservateur, Müller n'est pas partisan de la démocratie par amour de la hiérarchie et préférence pour un régime aristocratique, tandis que Sismondi, au nom de la raison et de la liberté."⁹

Another influence which Mr. Minerbi stresses is that of the Scottish historians and sociologists. In the case of Robertson, Hume, and especially Smith, there is of course no doubt in this respect. However, Mr. Minerbi puts his emphasis on Adam Ferguson and John Millar. This touches on a highly complex question which receives no adequate answer in the study in question. "Non abbiamo una testimonianza esplicita attraverso la quale si possa stabilire se Sismondi avesse letto direttamente le opere di Millar e di Ferguson...", states Dr. Minerbi. We have indeed some evidence to the contrary as we know from Sismondi's notes that the works of these writers were not amongst his books in Prescia. On the other hand, we know that they included the volumes of the *Bibliothèque Britannique*, with their emphasis on the work of Godwin, Bentham, and Dugald Stewart. However, none of these seminal sources is mentioned by Mr. Minerbi. On the contrary, he plays down the incontestable influence of the Geneva circle of teachers and friends. In the case of Pierre Prévost for instance, one of the important contributors to the review, he asserts rashly that 'non si può parlare di un scambio diretto tra i due'. However, apart from other evidence available, Sismondi himself described Prévost as 'mon ancien maître' as well as 'l'ami de mon père et de ma mère'.¹⁰ Nor

⁸ *De la Vie et des Ecrits de P.-H. Mallet*, Geneva, 1807, pp. 34-5.

⁹ Henri Perrochon, *L'Histoire des Républiques italiennes et la Suisse*, in *Studi su G. C. L. Sismondi*, ed. Luigi Einaudi, 1945, p. 189.

¹⁰ Letters of 2 March 1801 and 26 December, 1833, *Epistolario*, ed. Carlo Pellegrini, vol. I, No. 4, and vol. III, No. 492.

is Gibbon mentioned although Dr. Minerbi quotes himself Sismondi's letter to Dr. Moody stating that "I have in general taken for my model your Gibbon..."; Gibbon who admired the 'vigorous sense' of Mallet and who had written in 1762:

There is one (theme) which I should prefer to all others, *The History of the Liberty of the Swiss*, of that independence which a brave people rescued from the House of Austria, defended against a dauphin of France, and finally sealed with the blood of Charles of Burgundy. From such a theme, so full of public spirit, of military glory, of examples of virtue, of lessons of government, the dullest stranger would catch fire: what might not I hope, whose talents, whatsoever they may be, would be inflamed with the zeal of patriotism! But the materials of this history are inaccessible to me, fast locked in the obscurity of an old barbarous German dialect, of which I am totally ignorant, and which I cannot resolve to learn for this sole and peculiar purpose.

I have another subject in view, which is the contrast of the former history: the one a poor, warlike, virtuous republic, which emerges into glory and freedom; the other a commonwealth, soft, opulent, and corrupt; which, by just degrees, is precipitated from the abuse to the loss of her liberty; both lessons are, perhaps, equally instructive. This second subject is, *The History of the Republic of Florence, under the House of Medicis*: a period of one hundred and fifty years, which rises or descends from the dregs of the Florentine democracy to the title and dominion of Cosmo de Medicis in the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.¹¹

In the maze of references to other authors, Sismondi's own ideas are not given the prominence or the systematic treatment which one is entitled to expect. Nor are the editor's own values made explicit against which he evaluates the thought of Sismondi. Part of his evaluation is based, not on the *Recherches*, but quite arbitrarily on a chance find of his, a youthful, incidental versification, 'Fleurs de l'Helvétie'. Mr. Minerbi feels that this poem, in common, as he says, with Mallet Du Pan and P.-H. Mallet, was 'irremediabilmente reazionaria'¹² because Sismondi extolled the 'true equality' of the Swiss in the face of the egalitarian frenzy of the French revolutionary conquerors. Though he describes this attitude as 'irremediable', Mr. Minerbi states himself that what appears to *him* reactionary, was only a fleeting phase in Sismondi's development; even if, as it is not, correctly interpreted, the episode was hardly worth mentioning. Mr. Minerbi (wrongly) blames Sismondi for a longing for a harmonic world deprived of any contrasts but admits that on the contrary, following Smith, the Sismondian world of freedom emphasized as essential quality 'la possibilita di tensioni e contrasti'¹³. Here and there Sismondi's originality and intentions emerge but they are not easily freed from their entanglement in dubious interpretation and a surfeit of comparisons.

¹¹ *Autobiography*, Everyman ed., p. 111.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 39.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 35.

Sismondi started out from the need for a new political science, necessitated by the breakdown of the old European order and the introduction, by the French Revolution, of a new type of uniform, blue-printed legislation. He wanted to supply a general theory of liberty and of government; he understood that what had once been a matter of subjects wresting rights from powerful rulers, had now become the task of accepting and distributing duties among citizens. Like Montesquieu and Delolme, he therefore looked to England, where the nearest approximation of such a system had been translated into reality: he wrote 'according to english principles', that is, in the consciousness of a need for checks and balances in a mixed government. What perturbed and stimulated him, was the need for finding a balance between liberty and equality in a structured society, i.e. a society composed of classes with divergent interests; in short, the problem of democracy. In his debate with Rousseau he rejected the fiction of the general will as beset with the dangers of totalitarian majority rule; he saw clearly the terrible danger inherent in an 'aliénation totale de chaque associé avec tous ses droits à la communauté'. Like Bentham, he perceived that the liberty of the French revolutionary constitution was fictitious. He rejected both the *Ancien Régime* and the unqualified principles of the *French Revolution*; he extolled 'la liberté et le bonheur' as against 'l'honneur et la gloire'. Like Adam Smith and the Scots sociologists, he used history, including conjectural history, as the testing ground of political and social principles with a view to establishing a free and civilized order of society. As with them, his central interest was dictated by the rise of the middle classes, the new commercial and emerging industrial order, with a stronger emphasis, however, on the role of the labouring classes. New emerging classes—this problem led to the general question of the relation between tradition and planning, between 'laissez-faire' and state intervention in the existing order. The transition from a traditional 'ascribed' elite to a rational 'achieved' leadership as well as the advance from a purely institutional to an institutional and behavioural approach to political science, these were the modern, sociological topics of the debate opened by Sismondi which anticipated substantially the later contributions by Coleridge, Comte, Macaulay and the Mills, Tocqueville, Marx, Burkhart, M. Weber, up to the socio-political discussion in our own time.

Sismondi's youthful *Recherches* represents one of his opening shots in this debate. It requires to be read alongside his socio-economic work which brought his genius and his 'humanisme' to its highest flowering. There is reason to be grateful to the publishers and to the editor for making available in print his first political treatise. The time has certainly come for a new edition of the *opus*, now largely out of print, of this seminal thinker.

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